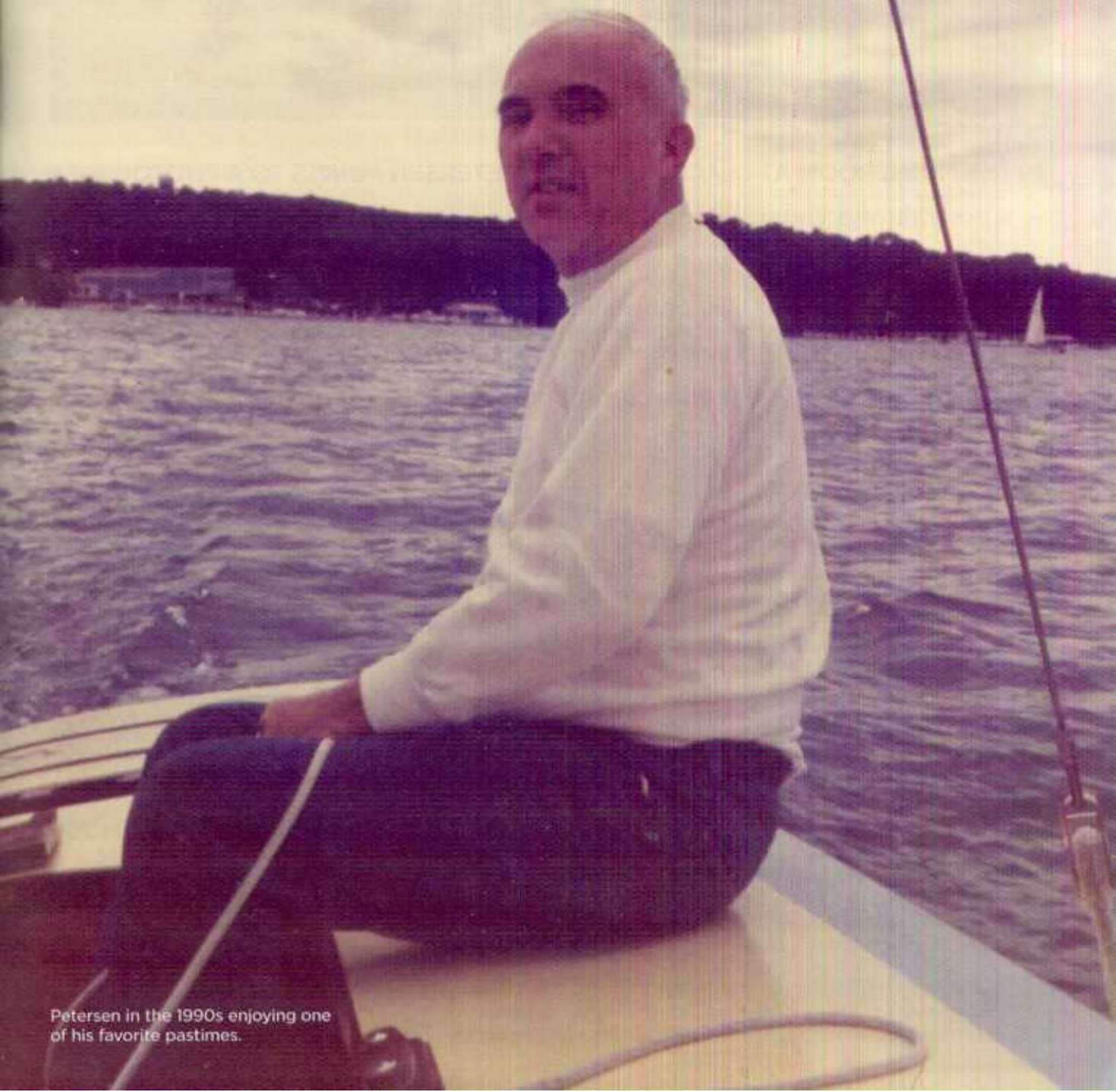


PROFILE

sharing a legacy

By Manya Kaczkowski



Petersen in the 1990s enjoying one of his favorite pastimes.



Black Point.

IN THE MUSIC ROOM AT BLACK POINT, BILL PETERSEN POINTS TO A PHOTOGRAPH — a portrait of a young woman. “That’s my Aunt Alma,” he says. “She was the rebel in the family. She went to Wellesley, and then to Puerto Rico after the Spanish-American War.” He pauses for effect; then casually adds, “And she had a Stradivarius.” Amazing as these few facts are (his aunt came of age in the late 1800s, long before it was commonplace for women to do as they liked) Petersen relays them with his usual deadpan style and a hint of mischief.

A philanthropist, Petersen is responsible for the donation of his family’s much-loved Black Point estate to the State of Wisconsin. The home is now preserved as a lovely example of the late 19th-century mansions presiding over the shores of Geneva Lake, most originally owned by Chicagoans as vacation retreats.

Petersen is one in a long line of family members doing extraordinary things, starting with his great grandfather, Conrad Seipp, a German entrepreneur who made his fortune in Chicago brewing beer. Petersen’s mother, Alma Schmidt Petersen (named after the indomitable Aunt Alma), was the director of the Welfare Council of Metropolitan Chicago and president of Hull House. And his father, Dr. William F. Petersen, was an engineer, a physician, a professor of pathology at the University of Illinois and an artist.

Following the family tradition of possessing many interests and talents, Petersen is a retired Chicago attorney, a sailor, an avid reader and writer (he’s presented several papers to the Newberry Library in Chicago), a gardener and a world traveler. Beginning with childhood, Petersen has managed — and is still managing at age 82 — to live a robust life. He grew up on the north shore of Chicago but spent every summer at Black Point with other members of the extended family.

“At one time, my grandmother and her sister owned the entire 100 acres,” he explains. The 12-bedroom home was often filled to bursting. “One summer there were 16 children here.” All of those seasons spent together made for unusually strong bonds between family members. “We’ve all stayed very close to our cousins,” he shares, showing off one of the

bedrooms filled with gorgeous faux-teak furniture from the 1890s. “My grandmother had this room, but no other rooms were assigned. It all depended on who was here at the time.”

No matter who was at Black Point, everyone kept busy with chores and recreation. In addition to swimming, farming and other outdoor activities, sailing was a huge part of life for Petersen. The family took to the water with a variety of boats for sailing competitions and leisure excursions. Petersen is still a sailor at heart; his eyes gleam when he describes the 12.5-foot-long sailboat he owns today. “We call it the Horror Shoff when we want to be formal,” he says. “When we want to be informal, we call it the Bulls-Eve.”

Although he no longer sails alone, Petersen still managed to get on the water several

times last summer. "It's a tiny boat. It holds four, but it's very comfortable and handles beautifully," he says. "There are only two of its kind on the lake."

But recreation hasn't been the only thing occupying his time — even as a child at Black Point, he and the other family members spent considerable time reading and studying. Tutors were brought in for the children, which may explain Petersen's love of learning. He enjoyed a successful 50-year law career in Chicago, starting out at the Northern Trust Company. The firm he most wanted to work for, Vedder Price, made him an offer two years later. He accepted, eventually becoming a partner.


Petersen remained single for many years, until he met Jane Jordan Browne, a literary agent, at her cousin's wedding. "We married late in life," he shares. "I was 50, and she was five years younger." They had a lot in common: a love of books, travel and busy careers.

Petersen is one in a long line of family members doing extraordinary things...

"She was a very hard worker," Petersen continues. "She owned her own agency (now known as Browne & Miller Literary Associates) with a partner and they had a large cross-section of books." In fact, Jane sold over 4,000 books during her career, including notables such as *The Memory of Eva Ryker* and *On a Clear Day You Can See General Motors*. She moved her agency from Los Angeles to Chicago, where the couple lived together, and when they could, they continued to spend as much time as possible at Geneva Lake.

In 1970, Petersen had another house built at Black Point near the main home; a smaller dwelling with a stunning view of Geneva Lake through towering trees. "I built this house," he explains, "because there was no heating in the other house." He and Jane were able, then, to spend time at the lake in winter as well as summer, and rent the smaller home to another family during warm weather.

Enjoy the shopping almost as much as you enjoy the shoes.



donald pliner
ecco
ugg
dansko
cole haan
kors
birkenstock
tecnica
frye
croc
north face
aerosoles
franco sarto
keen
merrell

the Bootery™

771 Main Street lake geneva 262.348.1911
492 Central Avenue highland park 847.433.1911

www.thebootery.com

Kirsch's Restaurant

Lakeside Fine Dining
on the Scenic Shores of Lake Como

Contemporary American Cuisine with
Mediterranean Influences

Wine Spectator
Best of Award of Excellence

Elegant Wedding
Receptions

Live Music Friday
and Saturday

Spring
Specials

KIRSCH'S RESTAURANT
AT THE FRENCH COUNTRY INN
3.5 miles west of Lake Geneva, off Hwy 50
RESERVATIONS RECOMMENDED
(262) 245-5756
www.kirschs.com



Bill Petersen (R) pictured in 2006 with his brother and sister-in-law, Edward and Zika. Photo courtesy of Gwen Tveter.

Through the years, Petersen watched the size, shape and composition of the family summer land evolve; various sections were sold off, family members moved away and the property became expensive to maintain. He knew he had to either sell it to a developer (and risk its certain destruction) or find

a creative way to preserve it. So more than a decade ago, Petersen, with the encouragement of his wife, began taking the necessary steps to turn Black Point over to the state.

It proved to be a difficult task — neighbors tried to block the project, fearing the

tranquil neighborhood would be overrun with tourists. Meanwhile, the project was rife with political scandal as well. Jane passed away in 2003, before the turn-over could come to fruition. The outlook of the donation of Black Point remained bleak until, in 2005, the Wisconsin Court of Appeals ruled that the project could proceed. Petersen, meanwhile, decided to move to a retirement community in Hanover, New Hampshire, where he has friends and relatives.

Although Black Point is now owned by Wisconsin and is open for seasonal tours, Petersen maintains a residence in the smaller home on the property and plans to keep returning to Geneva Lake each summer as he has for most of his life. When asked if it was difficult for him to turn the property over, he pauses, then says pragmatically, “It couldn’t go on forever.” But Geneva Lake is important to him. Even as he looks forward to the upcoming adventure, Petersen looks back toward the water and sighs, “I do wish I were sailing, though.” ▲



LAUDERDALE LAKES
MARINA

THE ONLY FULL SERVICE MARINA DIRECTLY ON LAUDERDALE LAKES

- Nautiques by Correct Craft • Supra • Moomba • Berkshire & Godfrey Pontoons • Hurricane Deck Boats

Open Tuesday - Saturday 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday 10 a.m. to 4

Phone 262-742-3898
Fax 262-742-2342
www.lauderdalelakesmarina.com

Located Just 10 Minutes
North of Lake Geneva off Hwy. 12/67

N7536 Sterlingworth Drive Elkhorn, WI 53121

Shorestations
Storage
Pro Shop
In / Out Service
Gas

